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Hazardous waste spilled in the Heights

City and state team cleans up Ravine Avenue

By Ina Schneider

Highly flammable hazardous waste spilled Wednesday, only a stone's throw from a child's treehouse on an abandoned lot in the Heights. The waste was found during the massive cleanup of the New York Avenue extension of Ravine Avenue, which starts in the Palisade cliffs and winds down into Observer Highway between Jersey City and Hoboken.

The cleanup is a combined effort by state and city officials to reclaim an extensive area that city officials say is one of the city's worst dumping grounds. The garbage-strewn public road runs past a neglected piece of private land. The property belonged to Ideal Co. Cooperage, a firm that re-conditioned storage drums and used the lot to store drums. While removing one of the site's abandoned cars, a payloader from the city's Incinerator Authority accidentally hit and punctured a 55-gallon metal drum hidden in the weeds. Ten gallons of the unknown contents spilled onto the ground, releasing a "solvent-type odor" which alerted officials to the possible danger. When they tested the liquid, authorities say they got high meter readings from the vapors and hydrocarbons emanating from the substance. The high readings indicated the fluid had a high carbon content and was highly combustible.

"At no time did that pose a threat to anybody's life or health," says Jim Mankowski, an environmental specialist from the Hudson Regional Health Commission.

No danger to public health

State regulations classify a substance as hazardous when it is ignitable. The biggest danger posed by the combustible liquid is that it's a fire hazard, says Lou Manzo, the city's chief health inspector.

Experts say the spill did not cause any injuries or endanger public health. "At no time did that pose a threat to anybody's life or health," says Jim Mankowski, an environmental specialist from the Hudson Regional Health Commission.

The spilled substance resembled a number of solvents

and test results to determine the exact nature of the fluid will not be available for several days, say environmental specialists. So at this time they can only speak in general terms about the health risks posed by solvents. Health experts say that direct inhalation of solvents can cause dizziness, light headedness, headaches, blurred vision and loss of consciousness. If the fluids come in contact with exposed skin, they can also cause skin irritation.

When the leakage occurred state and city environmental experts say they were the only ones on the site and they halted all work. Clean Venture, a Perth Amboy firm licensed by the state to clean up hazardous waste, was hired to remove the spillage. Inspectors say they're not

sure where the waste came from or if there's more; the property has been used by the public as a dump for years.

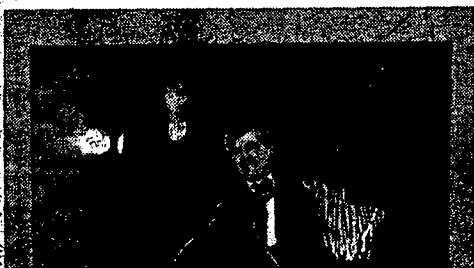
The drum that leaked was re-packed into a new drum, along with contaminated soil from the vicinity of the leak. The drum remains on the site along with other newly repacked drums which contain solid waste possibly contaminated by the spill. All are clearly marked with yellow hazardous waste labels. Pending test results to determine what the hazardous waste is, and how to dispose of it, the drums must remain on the site. Legally, they can stay there for ninety days, before authorities must take action to

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The Ravine Avenue spill site is roped off with hazardous waste warnings.

PHOTO BY INA SCHNEIDER



REAL ESTATE



PHOTO BY INA SCHNEIDER

WASTE *from cover*
remove them.

"The re-packed drums pose no danger to anybody unless they take the top off and start eating the dirt," says Mankowski.

Run through the jungle

Ridiculous as it sounds, Mankowski's statement doesn't seem so far-fetched. Everyday the authorities have seen people, young and old, ignoring the barriers closing off the road, the banners roping off the area and the posted signs—all warning of the presence of dangerous hazardous waste.

Officials say they tried without success to tell people to

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stay off the property. "Yesterday I was cussed out by a 5-year-old 'cause I wouldn't let him play in the drums," says John McDonald, an environmental specialist from JC engineering. "He said words I'd forgotten I knew. You wonder what his parents are doing."

After that response and others such as "I'm late to my job in Hoboken", authorities have given up trying to keep people away. Even as we spoke oblivious pedestrians strolled past the site, walking their dogs or pushing shopping carts as they would on any city street.

Despite the public's carefree attitude, Ravine Avenue is not a typical city street. Along the sides of the street lie

tires, auto wrecks, heaps of household refuse and discarded appliances. All this after officials have been working for almost a week to clear up the garbage.

The full-scale cleanup of the road and adjacent property began Thursday, September 22. Officials say they had hoped to clear out the solid waste in a week. After the solid waste was removed, the city engineers planned to reconstruct the road, put in new curbs and better lighting to prevent the persistent illegal dumping. Now street improvements are postponed until the spring.

The garbage toss

Authorities were just starting to see a glimmer of daylight through the jungle of junk when they ran into the problems on the Ideal Cooperage property. The old storage area is located on top of the Palisades, where New York Avenue curves. The company itself was located below the cliffs. After the owner of Ideal Cooperage died, the neglected drum-littered property became one big garbage dump, according to city incinerator authorities. The overgrown vegetation and out-of-the-way location made it easy for people to use the land as a dump.

Attempts to reach the owner's family have been unsuccessful. A lien may be put on the property to pay for the cost of cleaning up the firm's neglected land, say authorities. But, since the city can't collect on the lien until the land is sold, the taxpayers will have to front the cost of the cleanup.

Even as state and city personnel labored to restore the public and private property to some semblance of cleanliness, dumping continued. Burnt-out auto wrecks were ditched under cover of the night and in broad daylight inspectors watched people toss garbage out their windows to the cliffs below.